



There are only half a dozen radon health mines in the United States, and all six of them are located within twenty minutes' drive of each other in western Montana.



The Free Enterprise Radon Health Mine is the oldest of the bunch, opening for business as Montana's first uranium mine in 1949, before transitioning its extraction focus to the more intangible resource of personal health just three years later.

## THE UNDERGROUND HEALTH MINES OF WESTERN MONTANA

Site Visit / Free Enterprise  
Radon Health Mine /  
Uranium / Radon /  
Environmental Protection  
Agency / American Medical  
Association / Mennonites /  
Extraction / Inhalation /  
Medicine / Mining / Pain /  
Radioactivity / Resort /  
Therapy / Toxin / Tunnel /  
Underground / Uranium-238  
/ 46.2548 / -112.1470 /  
5449 Ft A.S.L. / Broken  
Clouds / 61°F / 13.61°  
(Magnetic Declination) / 24  
(Cyanometer) / 17 Mph  
(Wind) / W (Wind) / 326.7  
Km/Sec / 9.2 Protons/Cm3 /  
Waxing Crescent / 45  
Sunspots / 41 Db / Plant  
Hardiness Zone 4a / Boulder  
/ Montana / June 2013



"Radon therapy," the Free Enterprise brochure explains, simply "consists of series of daily visits to the Mine," where levels of the colorless, odorless, tasteless, and highly radioactive gas fluctuate between 700 to 2,200 picoCuries per liter of air. On average, they are about 1700 pC/l.



By way of contrast, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which regards radon as a toxic carcinogen, classifies levels of 4 pCi/L or above as the "action point," at which homeowners should take steps to limit their exposure. In the eyes of the World Health Organization, radon inhalation is the second largest cause of lung cancer in the world. In the United States, it is responsible for about 21,000 deaths from the disease every year, according to EPA estimates.

Hence the somewhat niche appeal of radon therapy, at least in the United States. The American Medical Association roundly denounced it as quackery in the 1950s, and has not reconsidered its stance since. Elsewhere, particularly in central Europe, Russia, and Japan, radon therapy for arthritis relief is an established alternative medicine—despite the fact that no one knows quite how it works.

In Germany, for example, where resort therapy—with its emphasis on the healing power of a particular place—is a long-established tradition, purpose-built radon tunnels are accessible by prescription only, as part of the country's national health system.





When **Venue** visited the Free Enterprise Health Mine, which charges \$8 for a 60-minute visit, a pink-carpeted elevator furnished with a single red chair—it felt vaguely like the set of a David Lynch film—took us down to our subterranean destination: a wood-framed mine shaft, 87 feet beneath the surface. Immediately to our left, a vinyl curtain screened off a heated area, in which several elderly Mennonites were sitting on thrift-store arm chairs, lawn furniture, and a couple of La-Z-Boy recliners, chatting in dialect, playing cribbage, and leafing through magazines.



The rest of the shaft stretched around to the right, at a chillier 40 degrees. The

rock walls glistened with damp, and were decorated with moss, graffiti, and rusted mining tools. The occasional padded bench sat under a heat lamp, offering a more solitary immersion.



Over the course of a typical treatment, clients spend between 30 and 60 hours down in the Health Mine, spread out over a 10-day period. The claustrophobic can stay above-ground, in an "inhalatorium" whose equally radioactive air is piped from a disused level immediately below the one we visited.

The invisible, healing (or poisonous) air, sold by the hour, is, of course, a nearly endless, renewable resource: pegged to the half-life of uranium-238, this Health Mine's subterranean wealth should be good for another 4.468 billion years.